

Carlyle and the Secession

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Thomas Carlyle was one of the most important figures of the nineteenth century, acclaimed throughout the greater part of his writing career, and by many after his death, as a religious force of paramount importance. He preached earnestness, submission, the gospel of work and of silence; many overlooked the contradictions in what he said and wrote, many accepted glaring inconsistencies and were glad to acknowledge that by example and incessant preaching Carlyle awoke in the nineteenth century a consciousness which to many was tantamount to religious awakening. A close examination of Carlyle's religion, his own private or public beliefs, is not the purpose of this paper; that would be a very sizeable undertaking. This paper seeks to focus attention on the earliest religious community Carlyle knew, the Seceder congregation of his parents in Ecclefechan, to describe the congregation and if possible assess some of its effects on Carlyle himself.

Ecclefechan, when Carlyle was growing up in the closing decade of the eighteenth century and the first of the nineteenth, was a small but active town, a stage on the Glasgow to London coach route, the centre of regular and important agricultural fairs and markets, and a focus of service industries for a rich farming area. Despite the agricultural emphasis there was considerable industry in the village, "trade and manufacture" including the manufacture of linen goods, ginghams, and straw hats.¹ A well-developed system of local carriers ensured the distribution of goods to neighbouring parishes, to Edinburgh and Glasgow and to Northern England.

Ecclefechan, then, was no sleepy hollow, but rather a moderately industrial busy town, enjoying the through traffic which modern progress has removed from it. A considerable number of bright young men left it to make their careers in the world of commerce, or to study at the University of Edinburgh. At home, the cultural life of the village centred very much on its two churches. One, the Established Church, was at Hoddam, one mile from Ecclefechan village. The other was a Secession charge, based in Ecclefechan itself, in a succession of premises which increased in capacity as the size of the congregation grew. Details of these premises, with illustrations, can be found in John Sloan's *The Carlyle Country* (London, 1904).

¹ These details come from *The Statistical Account of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1792), and *The New Statistical Account of Scotland* (Edinburgh and London, 1845), under "Hoddam". Carlyle helped foster local industry: see *Essays and Transactions of the Highland Society*, VII (1829), 290-291.

The Seceders were in the minority, but it was a flourishing minority. One thousand and seventy-nine of the parish population of 1,198 were members of the Established Church in 1791, while 119 were Seceders.² The congregation was proud of being separate and, although poor, could maintain a minister and a meeting-house. The area was vulnerable to change and depression, and the frequent poor harvests which were found in Carlyle's younger years caused scarcity.³ As Henry Hamilton has noted, "the standard of living of the mass of Scots people was particularly vulnerable to harvest fluctuations, since the bulk of the country's food was home-grown. . . . A bad harvest could thus send prices soaring and bring great hardship to the labouring population".⁴ Carlyle's father remembered these times vividly, and "he had noticed the labourers (I have heard him tell) retire each separately to a brook, and there *drink* instead of dining,—without complaint; anxious only to hide it".⁵ James Dawson Burn, a poor boy who lived through this period, recalled the hard winter of 1813-1814 when the corn was fit only to feed cattle, after lying unharvested till December. He had the misfortune to see poverty at close quarters, for in Moffat jail he was almost eaten alive by the rats which infested the place.⁶

It was an area, then, where conditions were not easy. In Ecclefechan itself there was a healthy diversity of industry, but any congregation working in such conditions must have had to cope with fluctuating congregational income and little money for unexpected expenditure. The Seceders of Ecclefechan, as a minority group, suffered these disadvantages to the full; yet casual visitors to Ecclefechan noticed how loyal people were to old, sober, industrious traditions,⁷ and the story of the Secession Church in Ecclefechan is just such a story.⁸

In 1747 the Secession Church was split over the administration of the Burgess Oath,⁹ and the two resulting branches (Burgher

² J. Yorstoun, in *The Statistical Account of Scotland*, III, 353.

³ See J. A. Symon, *Scottish Farming, Past and Present* (Edinburgh and London, 1959), 157.

⁴ H. Hamilton, *An Economic History of Scotland in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1963), 375.

⁵ T. Carlyle, *Reminiscences* (London, 1972), 31.

⁶ [J. D. Burn], *The Autobiography of a Beggar Boy* (London, 1855), 29, 66, 3.

⁷ I. Lettice, *Letters on a Tour Extending Through Parts of Scotland in the Year 1792* (London, 1794), 17-19.

⁸ Most of the details of the growth of the Ecclefechan congregations are found in A. Steele, *The Story of a Hundred and Fifty Years* (Annan [1910]), but it is also necessary to consult W. McKelvie, *Annals and Statistics of the United Presbyterian Church* (Edinburgh, 1873), particularly pages 65-67.

⁹ See D. Scott, *Annals and Statistics of the Original Secession Church* (Edinburgh [1886]), and D. M. Forrester, "Adam Gib, the Anti-Burgher", *Records of the Scottish Church History Society*, VII, (1941), 141-169.

and Antiburgher) separated according to their willingness or unwillingness to accept the oath. Till 1820, and the United Secession Church, the Secession Church was split in this way, and the two branches were themselves split after the turn of the century on theological grounds into the "Old Light" and "New Light" branches.

Research suggests that the Ecclefechan congregation was a New Light congregation of the Burgher branch — arguably the least extreme of the possible permutations, neither rejecting the Burgess Oath nor clinging to the less flexible dogma of the Old Light body. D. Scott's *Annals and Statistics of the Original Secession Church* lists fully the causes of acrimony between Burgher and Antiburgher, Old Light and New; he lists the Old Light secession charges, and neither "Hoddam" nor "Ecclefechan" appears. I take it that the acrimony was such that congregations would belong completely either to one or the other of the "Old Light" or "New Light" persuasions; as we know that Hoddam was a Burgher charge the absence of its name among the Old Light charges indicates that they were New Light Burghers, "disowning all compulsory measures in religion".¹⁰ The exceptionally independent nature of the Carlyles as religious thinkers tallies well with this deduction, as they found their Burgher Church a comfortable one to which they could fully adhere; had they had compulsion brought to bear on them, they would have reacted by simply walking out.¹¹

The characteristics of the Secession Church have been described as three: the growth of the evangelical and missionary spirit, the aggressive attitude to the Established Church, and the rapid growth of their congregations in Scotland. In 1747, when the Burgess Oath caused a rift in the Secession Church, there were 32 congregations; in 1820, when they reunited, there were 262.¹² Energy characterises all this description, intellectual and physical energy. The Ecclefechan congregation had its share of this. In 1738 they had first petitioned the Associate Presbytery of Annandale for sermon, and when Ralph Erskine preached to them a crowd of 10,000 is said to have been present.¹³ Much of the enthusiasm which sustained the Ecclefechan congregation may have followed from this occasion. From this time onwards sermon was occasionally preached, sometimes in Lockerbie, sometimes in Ecclefechan. It was the only Secession congregation in Annandale.

¹⁰ See Chapter VIII of Scott's *Annals and Statistics*; also page 41.

¹¹ Compare James Carlyle's condemnation of bad preaching in T. Carlyle, *Reminiscences*, 12. James Carlyle did in fact walk out of the congregation over one dispute.

¹² A. Thomson, *Historical Sketch of the Origin of the Secession Church* (Edinburgh and London, 1848), 151-152.

¹³ Numbers on this scale were not to be seen again till the 1820s, when Edward Irving made a triumphant preaching tour of Annandale.

and in 1744 it acquired its own minister. The church which was erected was sited, after bitter controversy, in Lockerbie; when the Church was split in 1747 the Burghers quickly separated from the Lockerbie congregation and petitioned for a minister of their own in Ecclefechan. The Presbytery was in favour, but in the succeeding decade preaching was scarce as ministers were few. In 1757 there was a complaint that there had been no sermon for nine months, such was the scarcity.

The Burghers congregation grew slowly and occupied temporary premises in Ecclefechan and in 1761 presented a call to John Johnston of West Linton. The Call is preserved today in the vestry of the former Hoddam Free Kirk, now Ecclefechan West Kirk; 48 names appear, and one of the elders and three other signatories are Carlyles. Mr Johnston accepted and was inducted in April 1761. From this point onwards the growth of the Church was continuous and remarkable.

Johnston's annual stipend reflected the poor conditions of the parish, being well below £50 in the years before 1780; in 1766, however, the congregation managed to acquire bigger and better premises, with accommodation for 600. This might seem excessive for a congregation of some 120, but the Sunday services were beginning to attract attention, and people walked to Ecclefechan to attend this worship from Annan, from surrounding Dumfriesshire parishes—even from England.¹⁴ Johnston himself was the really remarkable feature of the ministry over these years. Although a learned man,¹⁵ and one who could have held high office in the Burgher Church's Divinity Hall, he was content to develop his congregation, to help occasionally a young man prepare himself for university study.¹⁶ In 1766 he was Moderator of the Associate Burgher Synod. In the early decades of the nineteenth century his efforts were rewarded by the establishment of separate congregations for the offshoots of his morning visitors, at Annan, Chapelknowe, Lochmaben, Rigg of Gretna and Moffat. The geographical distribution of these locations suggests the width of Johnston's fame and sphere of influence. Johnston died in 1812 and the congregation paid him the compliment of a large and handsome (and expensive) memorial. His church and its services were a major influence on the early Carlyle. "Rude, rustic, bare, no Temple in the world was more so;—but there were sacred

¹⁴ T. Carlyle, *Reminiscences*, 178.

¹⁵ Dr. Lawson, Professor of the Burgher Church Divinity Hall, regretted Johnston's refusal of that office, as Johnston was "... the best qualified man in our body for that office". A. Steele, *The Story of a Hundred and Fifty Years*, 17.

¹⁶ Both Johnston and his son saved Carlyle at a crucial period in his schooling, when the local master's Latin proved inadequate and the pupil was in danger of faltering in his progress to high school, and university, as a result.

lambencies, tongues of authentic flame from Heaven, which kindled what was best in one, what has not yet gone out.”¹⁷

What sort of people formed the congregation which so powerfully affected Carlyle? Carlyle himself gives part of the answer in his *Reminiscences*:

Annapdale was not an irreligious country,—though Annan itself (owing to a drunken Clergyman, and the logical habits they cultivated) was more given to sceptical free-thinking than other places;—the greatly prevailing fashion was, a decent form of devoutness, and pious theoretically anxious regard for things Sacred.¹⁸

An interesting illumination of this remark is to be found in one of Carlyle’s letters to a student contemporary; writing from Annan Carlyle reports that

“... there are in Middlebie sundry cunning workmen — some skilled in the intricacies of the loom — some acquainted with the operations of the lapstone — who are *notable deists* — nay several aspire to taste the sublime delights of *Atheism*! Now when creatures, superior in so few respects (inferior in so many) to the cow that browses on their hills, begin to tread upon the heels of the wise ones of the earth — the hue and cry about freedom from popular errors — defiance of vulgar prejudices — glory of daring to follow truth, tho’ alone &c &c &c is annihilated — and — “all the rest is leather and prunella”.

Underneath the snobbishness of this remark lies a genuine awareness of the strength of local feeling, the move away from orthodox churchgoing religion.

In these circumstances secession became more than just a doctrinal matter, it often became the only way in which the worshipper could attend church and still maintain his self-respect. Yet local feeling went against this. The worshipper might seek to escape from this unsatisfactory Established Church position, but “It was ungenteeled for him to attend the Meeting-house”. Yet people found it altogether salutary, and “A man who awoke to the belief that he actually had a soul to be saved”, wrote Carlyle (no unbiassed judge, of course) “... was apt to be found among the Dissenting people, and to have given up attendance on the Kirk”. This was not merely local gossip and rumour (for the minister of Annan had succeeded his father, who had been excellent, and so the people were loyal to the son of such a father). “This was the case,” recorded Carlyle, “... as I had remarked for myself, nobody teaching me, at an early period of my investigations into men and things. I concluded it would be

¹⁷ T. Carlyle, *Reminiscences*, 179.

¹⁸ *op. cit.*, 176.

generally so over Scotland; but found when I went north, to Edinburgh, Glasgow, Fife, etc., that it was not, or by no means so perceptibly was."¹⁹ Carlyle went to church very early in his life, trained his memory by repeating the gist of sermons afterwards. He has a pencil note in a book which he read recalling one James Fisher, a blind poet of Dumfriesshire.

He lived in *Annan*, about 1804; & had died, or gone quite across to England (*died*, I rather think), before 1806. I remember well once sitting *beside* him in the Ecclefechan meeting-house through a sermon, and gazing with terror & *fascination* at his hideously protrusive blind eyes, or the one of them next me. Poor old soul, he was listening so seriously.²⁰

The note is meant to contradict the impression given by the book that Fisher was in Dumfriesshire in 1806; Carlyle supposes that he was there in 1804. This would suggest that 1804 is about the time Carlyle saw him in church, from which one can deduce Carlyle attended sermon (and sat through very long services) at the age of eight or nine. The Secession meeting-house was therefore part of his life very early.²¹

From his youth Carlyle felt a part of this congregation, he felt he belonged, certainly as his family belonged to a congregation which respected them;²² his father may even have been an elder. His own clear definition of the Church, as he saw it, was one which was closer to the truths of Christian religion than the Established Church at the time — in 1867 he was to define it as "*Free Kirk* making no noise" — that is, a refusal to belong to a decayed Established Church, carried out without the tumult of the Disruption of 1843. Everything in Carlyle's Seceder Church was discreet, based on personal conviction unshaking in its adherence to truth. It devoted itself to "preaching to the people what of the best and sacredest it could". If it had a fault, it was in excessive severity,

. . . a lean-minded controversial spirit among certain brethren, (mostly of the laity, I think); "narrow-nebs" as

¹⁹ Thomas Carlyle to Robert Mitchell, 14th June 1815, quoted from *The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle* [hereafter *Letters*], ed. C. R. Sanders, K. J. Fielding *et. al.* (Durham, N.C., 1970), I, 51; *Reminiscences*, 176.

²⁰ Carlyle's pencil note to J. Paterson, *Contemporaries of Burns and the More Recent Poets of Ayrshire* ([n.p.] 1840), 141, copy preserved in the Ewart Library, Dumfries.

²¹ Much of the district's social life revolved round the church, including the verbal jousting which the Carlyle family enjoyed. See *Homes and Haunts of Thomas Carlyle* (London, 1895), 8.

²² The inference is from Frederick Martin's rare biographical article on Carlyle, published in 1877 in the sole number of the *Biographical Magazine* to appear under Martin's editorship.

the outsiders called them; of flowerage, or free harmonious beauty, there could not well be much in this system: but really, except on stated occasions (annual fast-day, for instance, when you were reminded that "a testimony had been lifted up", which *you* were now the bearers of), there was little, almost no talk, especially no preaching at all about "patronage", or secular controversy; but all turned on the weightier and universal matters of the Law, and was considerably entitled to say for itself, "Hear, all men". Very venerable are those old Seceder Clergy to me, now when I look back on them. Most of the chief figures among them . . . were hoary old men. Men so like what one might call antique "Evangelists in modern vesture, and Poor Scholars and Gentlemen of Christ", I have nowhere met with in Monasteries or Churches, among Protestant or Papal Clergy, in any country of the world.—All this is altered utterly at present, I grieve to say; and gone to as good as nothing or worse.

Written from the vantage point of 50 years, this sums up what remained in Carlyle's mind as the value of his early Church. The value lay in personalities with whom to mingle, with the preaching of the word by life and example. People like Johnston of Ecclefechan, and his own father, lived in his memories as semi-sacred examples of Christian life in an age which had gone to another extreme. He quoted with approval the case of one Burgher Seceder who refused to interrupt family worship in order to save his entire crop, threatened by a sudden whirlwind. "Wind? Wind canna get ae straw that has been appointed mine; sit down, and let us worship God." From the vantage point of 1867, this seemed to Carlyle wholly admirable.

There is a kind of citizen which Britain used to have: very different from the millionaire Hebrews, Rothschild money-changers, Demosthenic Disraelis, and inspired young Göschens, and their "unexampled prosperity". Weep. Britain, if these latter are among the honourable you now have!²³

The minister and congregation of the Ecclefechan Secession church stood out in Carlyle's memory as near-perfect types of this ideal Christian. One characteristic was individualism — which, as one historian remarks, "might be expected in those who, though but a small minority in the Christian community, believed the cause of God was in their hands".²⁴ Carlyle himself testifies how little the New Light Burghers harped on this theme in their preaching,²⁵ how much the individuality was expressed in self-education, in

²³ T. Carlyle, *Reminiscences*, 175-177.

²⁴ D. Scott, *Annals and Statistics*, 591.

²⁵ T. Carlyle, *Reminiscences*, 177.

the Law, in the shaping of the individual life to make it conform to the highest ideal. So much was this the case in Ecclefechan that even the Established Church assistant minister (who wrote the article on Hoddam Parish in the *Statistical Account* of 1843) noted respectfully that "This is one of the oldest dissenting congregations in the south of Scotland, and some of its members are very respectable in their station, and easy in their circumstances".²⁶ This information in itself adds little (for we know from Carlyle that people had been driven to the dissenters despite social criticism of their desertion of the Established, "respectable" Church) but the tone, and the fact that it finds a place in the *Statistical Account*, shows how much the Seceders of Ecclefechan were held in respect as pious individuals.

Carlyle mentions several cases of this. One is the poor peasant who refused to take time off from worship for mere worldly ends. One is Adam Hope, a man who taught Carlyle in Annan and earned his intense respect. "He was a man humanely contemptuous of the world; . . . I should judge, an extremely proud man. For the rest, an inexorable logician; a Calvinist at all points, and Burgher Scotch Seceder to the backbone." Proud, independent, judging for himself what is right. Another such is James Carlyle. "He was among the last of the true men which Scotland (on the old system) produced, or can produce; a man healthy in body and mind; fearing God, and diligently working in God's Earth with contentment, hope and unwearied resolution." His greatest maxim was "That man was created to work, not to speculate, or feel, or dream", and accordingly he set to working with all his heart. "Though from the heart and practically even more than in words an independent man, he was by no means an insubordinate one," and he knew (and kept) his social place without showing the least servility. "The more I reflect on it," concludes Carlyle, "the more must I admire how completely Nature had taught him; how completely he was devoted to his work, to the Task of his Life; and content to let *all* pass by unheeded that had no relation to this." Whatever did not interest him (including poetry, fiction, most of the literature which so fascinated his son) he ignored; he sought to live his life by his own lights, and his proud independence fascinated his son who clearly envied it, even if he did not envy the restricted upbringing which had brought about the strength. "My Father's education was altogether of the worst and most limited," wrote Carlyle, but then education was not what counted in this case. The Church to which he belonged had educated him in his world-philosophy, a proud and independent one, and so he was in Carlyle's sight a fine and admirable product of the old system — a product perhaps the last of his kind. Unconsciously, unreasoningly, he was religious.

²⁶ *New Statistical Account*, 295.

He was Religious with the consent of his whole faculties: without Reason he would have been nothing; indeed his habit of intellect was thoroughly free and even incredulous, and strongly enough did the daily example of this work afterwards on me. "Putting out the natural eye of his mind to see better with a telescope:" this was no scheme for *him*. But he was in Annandale, and it was above 50 years ago; and a Gospel was still preached there to the heart of a man, in the tones of a man. Religion was the Pole-star for my Father: rude and uncultivated as he otherwise was, it made him and kept him "in all points a man".²⁷

Independence, strict attention to duty, to work, to life, rigorous attention to the preaching of the Word, these characterised Carlyle's father. In this he was true to the Seceders' character, described by one historian thus: "In attending to their own interests [the Seceders] have acquired that habit of exercising individual judgment, which stands closely connected with the continuance of ecclesiastical and civil liberty."²⁸ In this case of the Burghers, this led to a conservative position on theological matters. "Strictly orthodox", wrote one divine, describing the Burghers, "and specially called forth, as they conceived, to contend for the faith once delivered to the saints, they could hardly bear a deviation from the accustomed expressions which were wont to be used by sound divines in treating of certain doctrines".²⁹ We have seen that the "special calling" was not overplayed in the case of the Ecclefechan congregation, but their worship certainly did not admit much change. When paraphrases were first introduced to the form of worship, to add variety to the singing of the metre psalms, there was intense opposition,³⁰ in which the Carlyle family shared. Carlyle himself, now living in Edinburgh, replied to news of this that paraphrases would inevitably "come in", and they eventually did.³¹ The form of worship was sacred; Thomas Somerville recorded that in the eighteenth century Seceders had "held it sinful in any individual who professed to be a member of their community ever on any occasion to attend public worship in any of the parish churches" — on pain of expulsion.³² Individual judgment, and freedom of choice.

²⁷ T. Carlyle, *Reminiscences*, 4-10, 164, 174.

²⁸ A. Thomson, *Historical Sketch*, 164.

²⁹ Quoted from the unpublished notebook of Dr John Mitchell of Glasgow by Scott, *Annals and Statistics*, 16.

³⁰ Alexander Carlyle to Thomas Carlyle, 25th March 1819. MS in National Library of Scotland, 1763. 28.

³¹ E. W. Marris, Jun., *The Letters of Thomas Carlyle to his Brother Alexander, with Related Family Letters* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968). 27.

³² T. Somerville, *My Own Life and Times, 1741-1814* (Edinburgh, 1861), 375-376.

were thus only selectively to be exercised. Tradition was strong — Carlyle's father allowed little innovation in his reading — "Old John Owen, of the seventeenth century, was his favourite author".³³ Another time he described his father as "a serious man who gave his spare time to reading John Owen and other religious writers of that order".³⁴ James Carlyle's other literary interests were very restricted, and he forbade his family to read fiction. The theatre, of course, was unthought of, and Carlyle first came in contact with the major literary influence of his life, Shakespeare, only after leaving Ecclefechan and going to live in Annan. This was the debit side to the strenuously upright lives which have been described.

A more "moderate" approach would have made room for literary pursuits, for the arts, but one historian of the time saw this as being at too great a price. The moderates, wrote John Mitchell, cultivated themselves only by "declining the active and energetic discharge of the duties of their spiritual and evangelical function". Instead "they cultivated connection with the upper classes of society in their parishes, declining intercourse with those of low degree to whom the Gospel is preached".³⁵ One particularly extreme caricature of the moderates, as men who discount "the pungency of sin, the doctrine of salvation by grace, and joy in the atonement", to whom "justification, adoption and sanctification were rude scholastic terms" while "learned allusions, and flights of fancy clothed in a kind of half-poetic dress, occupied the place of a simple, grave, scriptural, and experimental preaching such as Scotland in her best days had been accustomed to hear . . ."³⁶ is by Struthers, who in his *History of the Relief Church* does not spare the moderates' dereliction of the evangelical duties so dear to the secession. To them "religion was no longer a thing of deep earnestness". The phrase could be Carlyle's. But Carlyle was more moderate than this — in the wider sense. Like T. C. Smout, he might have given the moderates credit for having been a valuable part of Enlightenment Edinburgh, where "the warm sociability of the eighteenth-century town must have formed the ideal environment for the cross-fertilisation of minds".³⁷ This is perhaps evident in the most clear-cut tribute he paid to the Church in a letter to John Stuart

³³ M. Conway, *Autobiography* (London, 1904), II, 88.

³⁴ I. Campbell, "Portrait of Carlyle", *The Weekend Scotsman*, 12, viii, 1967, 3; see also my "Irving, Carlyle and the Stage", *Studies in Scottish Literature*, VIII, 3 (January 1971), 166-173 for further details of Ecclefechan attitudes to art.

³⁵ John Mitchell, "Memories of Ayrshire", *Miscellany of the Scottish History Society*, VI (1939), 302, quoted from T. C. Smout, *A History of the Scottish People, 1560-1830* (London, 1969), 238.

³⁶ G. Struthers, *The History of the Relief Church* (Edinburgh and London, 1848), 190.

³⁷ Smout, *A History of the Scottish People*, 508.

Mill of 1832. "The History of the Scotch Presbyterian Church is noteworthy for this reason, that above all Protestant Churches it for some times was a real Church; had brought home in authentic symbols, to the bosoms of the lowest, that summary and concentration of whatever is highest in the Ideas of Man; the Idea unutterable in words; and opened thereby (in scientific strictness, it may be said) a free communication between Earth and the Heaven whence Earth has its being."³⁸

What then can be said of the Ecclefechan Secession church from which Carlyle came? It was an unusually strong congregation, it had its share of strong individual characters, it struck the youthful Carlyle very much, both because his parents adhered to it (and his respect for his parents was very great), and because it was the first church he knew; his teachers at school, his friends, his most intimate acquaintance in his twenties (Edward Irving) attended. It was not extreme, but a well-balanced independent body, stressing the evangelical function, the preaching of the Word, and the regulation of life according to the law, and the performance of the duties of work and submission in an essentially Calvinist universe. Carlyle sprang from such religious roots.

The severing of these roots is common knowledge, especially among those who succumb to the temptation of interpreting *Sartor Resartus* as literal autobiography, something Carlyle warned future generations not to do. Teufelsdröckh goes through spiritual agonies before, during and after his conversion enshrined in the "Everlasting NO", the "Centre of Indifference" and the "Everlasting YEA". These are given artistic form in *Sartor*, with all the artistic neatness of hindsight, for the struggles belong to the 1820s, while *Sartor* was conceived in the early 1830s. What actually lay at the root of the agonies, as the letters make clear, was the separation from the religious community of the Ecclefechan Seceders. First his parents found about his reluctance to accept the tenets of their faith unquestioningly, especially before he learned to guard his tongue. Innocent questions concerning the miracles met with shock and horror and a sense of family guilt rather like that felt by Robert Louis Stevenson when his free-thinking caused a major quarrel with his parents. There was, fortunately, no major quarrel in the case of the Carlyles. After Carlyle's public decision not to enter the ministry,

I told my Father and they [his parents] were much grieved: it must have been a sore distress to them, but they bore it nobly — and my Father said to me that notwithstanding. his house would always be a home to me and that no

³⁸ Thomas Carlyle to John Stuart Mill, 19th November 1832, quoted from *Letters of Thomas Carlyle to John Stuart Mill, John Sterling and Robert Browning*, ed. A. Carlyle (London, 1923), 26.

one in that house should ever speak or act with severity towards me on account of what I had done.³⁹

This was a major decision so far as Carlyle's religious thinking was concerned. Carlyle had rapidly weakened in his religious studies as his reading corroded his simple faith,⁴⁰ and as he came into contact with a professoriate who were, in general, successful moderate city ministers and, in the strongest possible contrast to the saintlike Johnston of Ecclefechan, worldly successful men, and, unfortunately, poor teachers. This had the double effect of repelling Carlyle from the university's Divinity Hall and from the moderates. Divinity Hall held absolutely no interest for him, as letters home show.

I have not been within its walls for many months — & I know not whether I shall ever return, but all accounts agree in representing it as one of the most melancholy & unprofitable corporations, that has appeared in these parts for a great while. . . . It may safely be asserted that tho' the Drs Ritchie junior and senior,⁴¹ with Dr Meiklejohn, Dr Brunton & Dr Brown were to continue in their chairs, dosing in their present fashion, for a century, all the knowledge which they could discover, would be an imperceptible quantity — if indeed it sign [sic] were not negative.⁴²

Soon afterwards he found the professor out when he called to enrol for another year's divinity study, and "my instant feeling was, *'Very good, then, very good; let this be finis in the matter.'* And it really was".⁴³ One small detail has never been noticed: Carlyle could have attended the Burgher Divinity Hall, but instead went to the Edinburgh one of the Established Church. There is no obvious reason for this, but an indirect piece of evidence might be that Burgher entrants were expected to have passed not only a full arts curriculum, "but . . . to possess a competent knowledge of Hebrew",⁴⁴ which Carlyle did not do then, or ever — certainly in Annandale only one man spoke Hebrew at this time to Carlyle's knowledge, and that was Johnston in Ecclefechan.⁴⁵

³⁹ Campbell, *Portrait of Carlyle*.

⁴⁰ I have tried to illustrate this process briefly in "Carlyle's Borrowings from the Theological Library of Edinburgh University", *The Bibliothek*, 5, 5 (1969), 165-168.

⁴¹ That is, Professors of Logic and Divinity respectively.

⁴² Thomas Carlyle to Robert Murray, 31st March 1817, manuscript in Arched House, Ecclefechan, *Letters*, I, 98.

⁴³ Quoted from a conversation between Thomas Carlyle and David Masson, in D. Masson, *Edinburgh Sketches and Memories* (Edinburgh, 1892), 262.

⁴⁴ Scott, *Annals of the Secession Church*, 604.

⁴⁵ This fact is explicitly noted by Carlyle in his commentary to Althaus' 1866 biographical article, "Thomas Carlyle", in *Unsere Zeit*, Leipzig, 1866, preserved in the National Library of Scotland, MS 1799.

The break with Divinity Hall was final, but fortunately there was no family break, Carlyle's most intimate friend at the time was Edward Irving, himself a parishioner of Johnston, whom he had walked from Annan to hear every Sunday. Irving at this time was teaching, preparing for his licensing and ordination; he took Carlyle to church frequently, and the two talked freely and easily on religious matters; one day, "just as the sun was sinking, [Irving] actually drew from me by degrees, in the softest manner, the confession that I did *not* think as he of the Christian Religion, and that it was vain for me to expect I ever could or should. This, if this were so, he had pre-engaged to take *well* of me,—like an elder brother, if I would be frank with him;—and right loyally he did so, and to the end of his life we needed no concealments on that head".⁴⁶ Both his family and Irving showed extraordinary good sense and good principle in their treatment of Carlyle's lapse from childhood faith; he retained a warm affection for their Church, and also an important respect for its values. Years later he could listen to the sound of the bell of Hoddam Kirk and find it "strangely touching — like the departing voice of eighteen hundred years". The result was that all his life Carlyle retained respect for the Scottish Church in all its branches as well as for those members who still attended a form of worship which he personally could not accept. The scorn he liberally poured on the "Hebrew Old Clothes" in his later writings was never directed at the Seceder Church, rarely indeed even at the Established Church of Scotland. Generations of diarists and autobiographers testify to Carlyle's warm tributes to the peasantry of his childhood religious community, and the strength (and value) of their Church and its principles. He retained the strong anti-Prelatic prejudice of the Seceders,⁴⁷ the strong conviction that a reinfusion of the Holy Spirit into the Church was necessary, which the Ecclefechan congregation certainly believed as a central tenet.⁴⁸ Carlyle followed the fortunes of the Seceders with interest; in May 1821, after their union, he wrote to his mother that he rejoiced to see "so many worthy characters — casting off the old man — laying down their miserable squabbles — and uniting in the good cause with all their heart".⁴⁹ He joined heartily in their theological conservatism, protesting against modernising translations of the Bible, the "grand old Book, crammed full of all manner of practical wisdom and sublimity — a veritable and articulately divine message for the Heavenward guidance of man". He could

⁴⁶ T. Carlyle, *Reminiscences*, 225, 282.

⁴⁷ Carlyle admitted this in 1852: see C. and F. Brookfield, *Mrs Brookfield and her Circle* (London, 1906), 387.

⁴⁸ Edward Irving had given this impression strongly to Coleridge: this is reported in T. Brash, *Thomas Carlyle's Double-Goer, and his Connection with the Parish of Row* (Helensburgh [1904]).

⁴⁹ Thomas Carlyle to Margaret Aitken Carlyle, [?] 4th May 1821. *Letters*, I, 357.

not accept the idea of a new version, "... his whole *feeling* went sorely against the altering of a single word or phrase, for he liked to use the very words his mother had taught him; and that dear old association should be undisturbed".⁵⁰ The people behind the legend, equally, were to be remembered intact, not modernised. One hearer heard Carlyle tirade against universities, parliaments, "orthodox theologies, railroads and free trade", all dismissed as "sham"; "while Oliver Cromwell and his Ironsides and the Old Covenanters who sang psalms and handled pikes on Dunse Moor, were held up to admiration as the only heroes in this country for the last two hundred years".⁵¹

In this Carlyle is completely in agreement with Irving; it is quite possible that his feelings date from early discussions between the two men. "No man bred in towns," wrote Irving, "can comprehend the nature of a Scottish peasant's prayer, and the martyr-wildness of their psalmody". Nothing, Irving went on to assert, he had heard in churches and cathedrals (and he must have heard Chalmers many times in Glasgow, while he was his assistant), came near to the prayers of the simple in their "smoky cottages".⁵² Elsewhere, too, Irving said he would prefer these to the "learned of the land".⁵³ Irving liked in his preaching to "strike a chord in the hearts of his hearers by touchingly alluding to covenanting times".⁵⁴ Hazlitt tried to mock Irving, saying he wished to "reduce the British metropolis to a Scottish heath, with a few miserable hovels upon it, where they may worship God according to the *root of the matter*".⁵⁵ But Irving was serious, and so was Carlyle. This, to him, was what the age required, a reassertion of the humble religious values of the Secession Church he had known in his youth.

The break with organised religious teaching, then, did not signalise a break with the Secession. Carlyle had the good fortune to remain in the community of the Church. He also had the friendship of Irving. His personal faith, however, as critics have made clear, was a complex amalgam of Scottish and German

⁵⁰ A. J. Symington, *Some Personal Reminiscences of Carlyle* (London, 1886), 32.

⁵¹ A. M. Stodart, *John Stuart Blackie, A Biography* (Edinburgh and London, 1895), I, 242.

⁵² E. Irving, *Collected Writings*, ed. G. Carlyle (London, 1865), III, 223.

⁵³ E. Irving, *Babylon and Infidelity Foredoomed of God: A Discourse on the Prophecies of Daniel and the Apocalypse* (Glasgow, 1826), II, 383. Pamphlet preserved in the British Museum.

⁵⁴ J. Dodds, *Personal Reminiscences and Biographical Sketches* (Edinburgh, 1888), 40. Irving's enthusiasm for the Covenanters is illustrated by his having contributed "A Tale of the Martyrs" to the *Dumfries Literary Gleaner* (Dumfries, 1830), 328-335.

⁵⁵ W. Hazlitt, *The Spirit of the Age: or Contemporary Portraits* (London, 1825), 91.

sources,⁵⁶ very different from the faith he lost in 1816 onwards. By *Sartor Resartus*, in the early 1830s, Carlyle had compounded a new faith, the "Everlasting YEA", from Goethe's writings, from many other Germans, from some still half-held tenets of belief from the Seceders, notably the duty to work, to accept the place allotted to the Universe. But they had become half unrecognisable in a tapestry woven from many complex foreign strands.

Carlyle revisited Ecclefechan many times; he often spoke with gratitude of its religious education, and with admiration of its religious people. Yet in later life he never moved back to its Church. The Secession belongs to Carlyle's early life; his mature faith belongs to a much wider world of experience and incorporates elements widely divergent from the relatively simple (and unforced) beliefs of Ecclefechan. The early admiration, we have seen, consisted largely of an admiration for figures — family, pastor, schoolteacher — even Irving. Irving, as the 1820s progressed, became alienated from Carlyle, who finally gave him up for mad after a serious attempt to talk him out of the two heresies which were to lead to his expulsion from the Scotch Church in London — his heretical beliefs concerning the human form and fallibility of Christ, and his wholehearted support of the "Gift of Tongues". Although Carlyle tried hard to reason him out of this,⁵⁷ and wrote an eloquent tribute to him after Irving died,⁵⁸ this was *finis* to any possible reconnection with the Secession *via* Irving. Although, obviously, both men had many ideas in common, they were poles apart in their total world-view. Irving was a dedicated minister of the Church, Carlyle a lone individualist who tried to preach to others a doctrine involving self-education and self-perfection, whereas Irving sought to reanimate a national Church to make this possible. Irving did not call Carlyle back to the Seceders, and the other figures largely died off. The Moderates no more attracted Carlyle — particularly in the *Burns* essay Carlyle expresses a contempt for moderatism in any form, but above all in religious matters. The Seceders, as Professor Henderson has noted, "represented a type that was particularly unhappy and impatient in the company of the Moderates",⁵⁹ and Carlyle was no exception. "Hushing new voices of the Church," writes another historian of the Moderates, "they fed the secessions

⁵⁶ The best scholarly treatment of this remains C. F. Harrold, *Carlyle and German Thought* (New Haven, 1934), but there is much relevant material in G. B. Tennyson, *SARTOR called RESARTUS* (Princeton, 1965).

⁵⁷ T. Carlyle, *Reminiscences*, 299.

⁵⁸ "Death of Edward Irving", in Carlyle's *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays* (London, 1857), III, 297-300.

⁵⁹ G. D. Henderson, *The Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1939), 106.

and, fearing ecclesiastical innovations, they fell behind the times".⁶⁰ Precisely — this is what Carlyle disliked and attacked in the Moderates. They had fallen behind the times, they belonged to an eighteenth century of enlightenment which, generally speaking, Carlyle detested for its deadening effect on men's spiritual development — to Carlyle the Age of Enlightenment was an age of stultifying scepticism and doubt. Hence his attack in the *Burns* essay on the moderate clergy of Edinburgh and Ayrshire, who taught Burns more than he needed to know — taught him to mingle religious austerity with artistic pleasure and so destroyed his simple faith. Carlyle disliked this, and disliked the moderate clergy of the Established Church he met in Edinburgh. Deprived of a living tradition which Irving might have represented, and repelled from a moderate tradition he considered dying or dead, Carlyle turned to the memory of the Seceders of Ecclefechan, and in a world of change, religious, social and political, he preached to a respectful (but unresponsive) world the necessity of a revival to such standards of life and behaviour. It was a glowing ideal, but one the world of Victorian Britain did not accept. And so, as the century progressed, Carlyle saw the Secession Church more and more in a historical view, as remote but wonderful, belonging to a golden age to which there is no return. After recalling the Church of his youth in the *Reminiscences*, he notes sadly that "all this is altered utterly at present, I grieve to say; and gone to as good as nothing or worse".

It began to alter just about that period, on the death of those old hoary Heads; and has gone on with increasing velocity ever since. Irving and I were probably among the last products it delivered before gliding off, and then rushing off, into self-consciousness, arrogancy, insincerity, jangle and vulgarity, which I fear are now very much the definition of it.

Between them and himself, a gulf was fixed. Across the gulf, ineffacably, stood the memory of his father.

He was never visited with Doubt; the old Theorem of the Universe was sufficient for him, and he worked well in it, and in all senses *successfully* and wisely as few now can do; so quick is the motion of Transition becoming: the new generation almost to a man must make "their Belly their God", and alas even find *that* an empty one. Thus curiously enough, and blessedly, *he* stood a true man on the verge of the Old; while his son stands here lovingly surveying him on the verge of the New, and sees the possibility of also being true there. God make the possibility, blessed possibility, into a reality!⁶¹

⁶⁰ J. T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism* (New York, 1954), 358.

⁶¹ T. Carlyle, *Reminiscences*, 4, 177.

However much he yearned for his father's stable faith and quiet confidence — and obviously he did yearn — he saw that it was not possible for him in the new century. And so his father's memory, and that of the Seceders of Ecclefechan, remains as a sort of backdrop to Carlyle's teaching, not, as many critics would have it, as the "inherited Calvinism" of his boyhood, but as a distant ideal, separated from real present-day life by an impassable gulf. Carlyle sees both the ideal and the gulf; his religious teaching to the nineteenth century might be in part defined as recommending the ideal and seeking to bridge the gulf.